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# Thinking the Difference: On Feminism and Postcolony [review essay]

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# Thinking the Difference: On Feminism and Postcolony [review essay]

Anne Castaing

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## RÉFÉRENCE

Haase-Dubosc, Danielle; Marcelle, Marie E. John; Melkotte, Marini Rama; Tharu, Susie *Enjeux contemporains du féminisme indien*, Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'Homme, 2002, 445 pages.

Van Woerkens, Martine *Nous ne sommes pas des fleurs: deux siècles de combats féministes en Inde*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2010, 363 pages.

- 1 The recent publication in France of two volumes on South Asian feminism and its reception in the West—Danielle Haase-Dubosc *et al.*'s *Enjeux contemporains du féminisme indien* (2002) and Martine Van Woerkens' *Nous ne sommes pas des fleurs: deux siècles de combats féministes en Inde* (2010)—has raised several key issues regarding the complex and somewhat ambiguous collusion between feminist thought and postcolonial theory.
- 2 Much has been written (Kiswar 1985, Chatterjee 1993, Sarkar 1999 & 2001) on the ambiguity linked to the evaluation of the social, familial, cultural, political, historical, and especially symbolic role of women in South Asia: how should one interpret Indian patriarchy when the familial and social subjugation of women stands in contrast to symbolic figures of *domination*, power, and anger as well as major political and historical figures?<sup>1</sup> How should one interpret the colonial discourse aimed at emancipating the Indian 'veiled woman' depicted as the victim of traditional barbarism? And how should one understand the figure of the sacrificial female warrior who inhabits the Indian literary landscape along with the docile housewife embodied by Sita? The omnipresence of women's issues in South Asian political and historical discourses can nevertheless assume an attempt to 'speak for' women, and thus to reduce them to silence.

- 3 This well-worn idea, generalized by Gayatri C. Spivak's overly acclaimed article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1994 [1988]), nonetheless raises a crucial question, which could suggest practical implications for Spivak's convoluted line of questioning: is a history of women as *subjects* possible? Can women speak, whether in history books or across historical literature? The introductory statement from Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon's exemplary essay, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, paves the way for an alternative (feminist) reading of history: 'What is presented here is in the nature of an exploration, an attempt to communicate an experience of partition through those whose voices have hitherto been absent in any retelling of it: women who were destitute in one way or another by the event' (1998: xi). 'Experience', 'voice', 'absence', 'retelling', 'destitution': these are the keywords for a historiographical project aiming to give *voice* to that *absence* through a direct and liberated expression of *the experience* by 'polyphonizing' the historical narrative.
- 4 If the 'history from below' of subaltern studies aims at this rereading 'against the grain' of the colonial (and postcolonial) history of India by highlighting the 'daily forms of resistance', it suggests above all a 'redefinition' of the archive itself: wherever the traditional archive is insufficient (particularly concerning women's history), recourse to 'different' sources—in which the 'subaltern voice' can be heard<sup>2</sup>—is necessary. These include first-hand accounts of women abducted during Partition in Bhasin and Menon's as well as Urvashi Butalia's essays, autobiographical narratives in Tanika Sarkar's essay (1993), and literary texts in the works of Aamir Mufti (2000) and Partha Chatterjee (1993). It is through the *alternative* that feminist history is constructed; it is in the margins that is woven the history of this 'silenced subaltern' whom Spivak seeks to expose.
- 5 Focusing on the 'modes' and the 'means' of representation (of the subaltern, or women in a postcolonial context) sheds light on one of the main issues raised by the collusion between the subaltern studies discourse (or, by extension, the postcolonial studies discourse) and feminist discourses: how do we *narrate* the 'Oriental Woman', the 'Third-World Woman', without speaking for her, without condemning her to an archetype (the docile wife or the vengeful goddess)? In other words, how can one emancipate feminism from monolithic thought that is euro-centered? Thus, how do one edify a feminism that could consider cultural specificities, which would be consistent with this 'historically muted subject of the subaltern woman' in Spivak's words (1994 [1988]: 295), and understand identity as being 'relational and historical'?
- 6 The gender issue in a postcolonial context follows a tormented path, which colludes with the polemical history of the ethnocentrism of Western academic discourses and their universalist agenda. The 'second wave' of Western feminist critique—concerned with identifying the ramifications of the patriarchal structures aiming at oppressing women as a whole, thus striving to identify a 'main enemy' and 'unique type of oppression'<sup>3</sup>—was rapidly subject to controversies within the ranks. Identifying a 'unique enemy' had the consequence of erasing all the specificities (whether social, racial, cultural, or sexual) of this oppression and, consecutively, of denying all other *cumulative* forms of oppression. Black Feminism, for example, denounced the universalizing elitism of such discourses, which are produced *by* and *for* the white, middle-class, heterosexual woman.<sup>4</sup> Such criticism was crucial as it helped focus attention on identity, with all its heterogeneity, and thus denied universalism and categories, including that of the 'oppressed group'. In this regard, the 'sorority' claimed by the main feminist wave of the 1970s, which called for solidarity within a common struggle against male oppression, can be seen not only as

utopian but also as a negation of the differences against which the 'third feminist wave' rose up on a massive scale.

- 7 This condemnation aimed at promoting a feminism that would be racially, socially, and sexually aware, and which identified as its 'main enemy' the sum of the systems of oppression in Western countries. It also sought to edify a 'postcolonial feminism'—a 'postcolonially aware' feminist discourse stemming from an articulation of gender oppression, class/caste/ethnic group/race oppression, and also *geographical and historical oppression* as an extension of the Orientalist discourses. Using the example of Julia Kristeva's essay *About Chinese Women* (1974) as the paradigm of Western discourse on the Third-World oppressed woman, Spivak, for instance, censures certain aspects of 'French feminism' and identifies a simplistic and universalizing conception of women along with a typically Orientalist essentialization of the 'Other'.<sup>5</sup>
- 8 The universalism and ethnocentrism of certain feminist discourses whose 'adepts', as Ann du Cille writes, 'continue to see whiteness as so natural, normative and unproblematic that racial identity is a property only of the non-white' (1996: 100), gave rise to a wave of questioning, which in turn led to renewed reflection on the arbitrary categorizations instituted by feminist discourses and extended the quest for specificity to an extra-European dimension. It thus promoted the systematic integration of cultural, geographical, and historical features in any discourse on women, on their representation, and on patriarchy.
- 9 In this vein, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991, 2003) advocates a 'feminism without borders', which promotes both the decolonization of feminism and the acknowledgement of *differences* and thus of borders. She criticizes the way Western feminist theory colonizes the heterogeneity of the experience of 'Third-World women', and urges for the deconstruction of the image erected by the discourses stemming from Western humanism. In parallel, Julie Stephens unravels the 'Feminist fictions' (the 'fictions of Otherness' identified by Edward Said in Orientalist discourses) produced both by Western and Indian feminist anthropologists<sup>6</sup> on the 'Third-World Woman' in a traditional context, which continue to see 'her' as a paragon of softness, passivity, and docility who submits to an immutable patriarchy. Stephens (1989: 110) also identifies a striking characteristic in this type of discourse: the 'universalism' of womanhood, which erases all cultural specificities. In other words, as Stephens writes, where women are concerned, '*nature prevails over culture*'.
- 10 In this discourse, the parallelism established between colonial oppression and male oppression is crucial;—not as a collusion, but in the process of their reification of the Other, the Other which is condemned to be muted, to be 'spoken for'. The 'postcolonial feminism' advocated by feminist theorists such as Spivak, Deepika Bahri, and Chandra Mohanty thus requires the necessary acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of women (and not *woman*) as the subjects of their own history and discourse—a heterogeneity subverted by the ethnocentrism of certain feminist rhetoric that reproduces Orientalist discourses.
- 11 The representation of the 'Third-World Woman' raises two issues: the essentialization of 'womanhood' and the homogeneity at the heart of this fiction of womanhood on the one hand, and the identification and definition of patriarchy on the other. Whereas both are inextricably linked to the 'postcolonial issue' the relationships they maintain with it are distinct: if the issue of patriarchy understands 'postcolonial' in terms of domination versus submission, the issue of the representation of women understands postcolonialism

through its *cultural expression* as a culture of contacts and a relationship with diversity, in Homi Bhabha's use of the term.<sup>7</sup> Here is a crucial dimension: given that the genesis of postcolonial studies lies in the cultural field and that the first symptoms of the 'postcolonial situation' were located in literature, it is essential to identify the link between gender and postcolonialism in cultural expression, and not only in social or political expression.

- 12 Moreover, this link underscores the *heterogeneity* (a key concept of the postcolonial discourse) of womanhood's representations in postcolonial contexts and the diversity of these representations. 'Decolonizing gender', in Talpade Mohanty's words, suggests accepting the diversity promoted by the author, but also implies 'provincializing Europe'<sup>8</sup>—in other words, marginalizing the colonial reading and writing of gender in a non-Western context.
- 13 Despite her obvious links with feminist or otherwise 'French Theory', Spivak's work is relatively new to France. Nonetheless, the recent publication of four of her essays within four years<sup>9</sup>—including a new translation of the well-known 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'<sup>10</sup>—bears witness to a growing interest in her work. Underlying this interest, however, is the sensitive issue of how France perceives its colonial past and its protective reflex towards contemporary feminist thought, the French roots of which are encroached on by gender studies. This dual relationship that links French academics with both feminism and its colonial history would appear to explain the belated interest for in issues of postcolonial feminism and the exigency compelling the 'New French Thought'.
- 14 This ambivalent relationship that links France with the 'Third-World Woman' and the cliché it continues to convey lies at the heart (or at least in the agenda) of two recent French essays on South Asian feminism: Danielle Haase-Dubosc *et al.*'s *Enjeux contemporains du féminisme indien* and Martine Van Woerkens' *Nous ne sommes pas des fleurs: deux siècles de combats féministes en Inde*.
- 15 In the first essay, the relationship between France and Indian feminism is justified by the conditions under which the volume was produced: an international conference on French, Indian, and Russian research on the 'Woman issue'. The publication project in French is thus accompanied, as Haase-Dubosc writes, by a concomitant publication in India of a volume on French feminism. At the heart of Haase-Dubosc's volume is the attempt to decolonize feminism, not only by examining the resemblance between the different movements and claims—whether French or Indian—but also, above all, by underlining the specificities (whether regional, historical, or cultural) that characterize these movements. In other words, in this volume, heterogeneity prevails over any attempt to standardize women, oppression, and the modes of struggle.
- 16 What is crucial in the volume is both to create links (or *borders*, in Talpade Mohanty's words) and to deconstruct existing borders—to *decolonize* gender. Hence, there is the need to cross and confront (ideas, perspectives, contexts), which aims not only at underlining the singularity of contexts (and thus of the emerging modes of women's movements), but also, through the volume's dialogic structure, at persuasively bypassing the pitfalls of universalism. Stereotypes also need to be discussed as they echo France's Orientalist past: it is essential, as Haase-Dubosc writes, to 'radically break up with this situation *de facto*', to 'produce a continuous dialogue' and to 'acknowledge at every step that France and India are complex territories regarding feminist struggle and involvement' (xvi).

- 17 The volume comprises thirty articles written by South Asian researchers or activists at the heart of contemporary debates, and bears witness to the diversity of its fields of investigation: history (Uma Chakravarti on gender comprehension in ancient India; Menon and Bhasin on women's abduction during Partition); culture (Susie Tharu and K. Lalita on literary history; N. Pushpamala on sculpture); social science (Annie Namal on Dalit women; Madhu Kiswar and Ruth Lalita on dowry); politics (Flavia Agnes on secular women's movements, Nivedita Menon on quotas); health (Veena Shatrugna on women and mental health; Mira Sadgopal on fertility); and environment and development (Vandana Shiva on eco-feminism; Mary E. John on gender and development). The volume thus underlines what Haase-Dubosc and Meenakshi Lal (2006) claimed a few years later in their gripping article 'De la postcolonie et des femmes': the urge to deconstruct the Orientalist image of the docile and silent Third-World Woman' and revalorize the discourses of and on women, the specificity of non-Western feminist movements, and the promotion of history and culture in the approach of such movements. In other words, it argues that women *can* speak in an alternative, even subversive, language.
- 18 For Tharu and Lalita, this territory could be embodied in the feminist history of Indian literature they produced, *Women Writing in India* (1991), the preface to which is translated in Haase-Dubosc's volume. They emphasize less the existence (or relevance) of women's writings—to which the number of entries in both volumes already testify—but rather the marginalization of these writings in traditional histories of literature, when they are not altogether caricatured. Far from essentializing women's writings, this 'écriture blanche' in Hélène Cixous' words (1975), Tharu and Lalita underline the specificities of both gender and historical experience: literary expression has to be read as both gendered and historicized, and as *contextualized* in both ways. Interestingly, they also posit womanhood and women's culture as an alternative culture, even a *subculture*: subalternized, transgressive, and impermanent.
- 19 In another context, Bhasin and Menon use the metaphor of women as 'permanent refugees' in their seminal essay on abducted women during Partition, 'Rapatriement, rupture, résistance: l'État indien et l'enlèvement des femmes pendant la Partition'.<sup>11</sup> Lamenting the absence of a social history of Partition (at least in 1993, when the article was first published), the authors highlight a striking paradox: the marginalization of women in the history of Partition does not demonstrate their central role, both symbolic and concrete, during the violence of Partition, notably embodied by the massive scale of abductions and subsequent aggressive recovery campaigns undertaken both by India and Pakistan. Could the abducted or forcibly recovered woman—this 'permanent refugee' or 'skeleton' in Amrita Pritam's words—become a metaphor for women's condition where marginalization is the norm, where speaking is not authorized? Mahasweta Devi's superb story translated in this volume, *Stanyadayani* ('Breast-giver', also translated elsewhere into English by Spivak<sup>12</sup>) attests to the appropriation of women's discourses and voices, condemned like the story's heroine to see their body exploited, both as mothers (or 'breast-givers') and as the metaphors of a nation that will never acknowledge them.
- 20 This issue also traverses Martine Woerkens' essay. One remembers the noteworthy *Le voyageur étranglé: l'Inde des Thugs, le colonialisme et l'imaginaire* (1995): an ambitious investigation of the Thugs (bandits who strangled their victims) that questioned the representation of the Other in the colonial discourse. Van Woerkens' new essay concerns another crucial issue both in the colonial and postcolonial discourse: women, their agency, and their empowerment in recent South Asian history. In many ways, Van

Woerkens' ambitious undertaking in *Nous ne sommes pas des fleurs: deux siècles de combats féministes en Inde* feeds with its steamy, undulant flesh into these essential reflections. History, women, India, Orientalism—these are the essay's keywords, which aims, in the wake of *The Other Side of Silence* by Butalia (2000), *Borders and Boundaries* by Bhasin and Menon, and, even more so, *The History of Doing* by Radha Kumar (1993), to weave a history of Indian feminism by revealing the diversity of women's struggles since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to highlight the agency of these women in history, and to give voice to this muzzled majority.

- 21 The book is structured into three main parts, each concerned with exceptional female figures (the elite, the middle class, and plebs), with the goal of calling attention to the 'silent revolution' (Van Woerkens 2010: 31) initiated in high society. It has a chronological orientation that may, admittedly, bear witness to the evolution and transformations in feminist struggles.
- 22 The first part, 'Women in the Indian Elite', focuses on influential female figures from the cultural landscape of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: Ramabai Ranade (1862-1924), author of *Memoirs of Our Life Together* (1910) and wife of the Marathi reformer Govind Ranade; Anandibai Joshi (1865-1887), India's first female doctor; Tarabai Shinde (1850- ?), author of the scathing essay *A Comparison Between Men and Women* (1882), recently unearthed and translated into English; Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858-1922), doctor and essayist, and author of *The High Caste Hindu Women* (1887), also recently 'rediscovered' by two feminist historians, Uma Chakravarti and Meera Kosambi (1998); and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya (1903-1988), nationalist, activist, and essayist. Van Woerkens highlights the gradual emergence of women's issues onto the Indian cultural and political landscape from the beginning of the reformist movements until Independence as well as, significantly, the fragile conjunction between writing and gaining a voice. The chapter describes Ramabai Ranade's gradual move towards the subjective 'I' of what appears to be a young, immature, and dependent woman's hagiography of her husband. She also demonstrates the difficult emancipation of women from the family and especially from marriage, where ordinary domination is also exercised through brutality.
- 23 The second part of the volume, which discusses the middle class, is dedicated to the mythologized figure of Indira Gandhi, who is depicted either as vengeful and victorious Durga or as solicitous Lakshmi. Through this portrayal, the author seeks to unravel the stereotype of submission attached to 'the Oriental woman' by focusing on a figure of power ruling the world's largest democracy with an iron hand, and also to highlight the ambiguities of being faced by her female condition. Whereas, and under the influence of Western mobilization, the 1970s might represent the pinnacle of feminist movements in India, these movements were also determinedly silenced under Indira's strong hand. But this dubious heritage, the chapter concludes, is not sufficient to define a unique feminism and femininity, which result from a social, historical, and cultural context. If some feminist struggles are India-specific (dowry, child marriage, *sati*, etc.), so is the construction of 'womanhood' as are relations between the sexes. Quoting the novelist Mrinal Pandey, the author situates Indian female accomplishment within a non-oppressive couple, where women's freedom does not involve a relation of conflict with, or the 'imitation' of, men. The author inquires: 'Is rejecting the battle of the sexes linked to the fact that Indian culture guarantees every woman who accomplishes her 'feminine duty' an enviable position in society?' (Van Woerkens 2010: 168).



- 24 The last chapter, *The Plebs*, concludes the book with a staggering swarm of characters, narratives, concepts, and references. Focusing on two well-known characters from the lowest castes (or classes?) of Indian society, the 'Bandit Queen' Phoolan Devi and the housekeeper and writer Baby Halder, it seeks to highlight the collusion that occurs between discriminations of class, caste, and gender in India, the consequence of which is the 'silencing of the subaltern'—in this case, triply the subaltern, that is, the untouchable woman. Women can thus speak, the author implicitly concludes, by inventing alternative strategies of resistance, and constructing parallel histories and ways of formulating them.
- 25 Although one might be won over by this bold conclusion in its attempt to consider from an historical perspective the alternative cultural 'modes of communication' established by women, it is difficult to identify where, in this work, this was the case, in spite of ample documentation and the use of 'alternative sources' such as fiction and personal narratives. A comparison with the excellent work, *Listen to the Heron's Words* (1994) by feminist anthropologists Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, does not go beyond the few illuminating phrases that are thrown in near the end.
- 26 Indeed, the main problem with *Nous ne sommes pas des fleurs* is that it incessantly contradicts the principles it displays in the title, announces in the introduction, and restates in the conclusion. The (unwitting) purpose of the volume is not to undo the essentialist representation of the 'Oriental woman' or to 'decolonize gender' by highlighting the diversity of indigenous strategies of resistance but, on the contrary, to force Indian women back into the tenacious stereotypes that accompany Western—if not Orientalist—discourses: the docile wife (Sita, embodied by Ramabai Ranade); the furious and vengeful warrior (Durga, *alias* Indira Gandhi); and the oppressed untouchable (Spivak's subaltern, embodied by Baby Halder). Clearly, these are reductive readings of the female subject that do not recognize her agency and question neither the metaphorization (and reification) of women, nor their incorporation, under the features of Shakti or Sita, into a nationalist project saturated with patriarchal discourses. The identification of a duplicity (Sita vs. Durga) inhabiting 'woman' has nothing original about it and is reminiscent of essentialist ideas of a 'female temperament' that houses both gentleness and anger.
- 27 As a matter of fact, the volume's position on feminism remains highly ambiguous, caricaturing or even disqualifying it. Even more troubling is its relation with Western discourses, which it holds as implicit and often anachronistic models. It is important to recall the crucial symbolic position of women's issues—incarnated by colonial discourse as victims of 'barbarian and degenerate' practices, which aim to justify colonization as a 'mission of salvation'. 'White men are saving brown women from brown men', parodies Spivak, in the clumsy translation quoted by Van Woerkens (2010: 327).
- 28 The recent debates around the Femen's actions in Tunisia and the arrest of three of their members for gross indecency illustrate the way these issues continue to be both crucial and sensitive. Can feminism continue to exist in a 'standardized form' as the one embodied by the Femen and their style of staging the liberation of women's bodies? Or, on the contrary, can feminism resist the cultural exception that could compromise its essential principles? In other words, how do we comprehend/think the difference without reproducing the radical scheme as such produced by both the colonial and the patriarchal discourses?



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## NOTES

1. Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal (2004) identifies common analogies between female political figures and mythological figures, particularly the goddess Shakti, the female power, which for example justifies the authoritarian use of power by Indira Gandhi.
  2. At least compared to 'more conventional and direct sources' according to the historian Sudhir Chandra (1985: 180), which justifies his use of literature as allowing it to underline the communal consciousness in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: 'Nowhere is [the] ambivalence [between communalism and nationalism] better exhibited than in contemporary literature. For in matters relating to consciousness, the more conventional and direct sources on which historians usually rely for their construction of reality do not offer the kind of material and insights that literature does'.
  3. In reference to the title and argument of Christine Delphy's paradigmatic essay (1998, 2001).
  4. See notably bell hooks' work on Western feminists' racial stereotypes (hooks 2003). In the same volume, see also the Black Feminist poet Audre Lorde's excellent text
  5. See Gayatri Spivak (1981).
  6. Such as Doranne Jackson (1982), Gail Omvedt (1980), and Miranda Davis (1983), quoted by Julie Stephens.
  7. According to Homi Bhabha (1994), hybridity should be understood as a mode of relation to cultural difference and 'otherness' resulting from contact with the diversity of cultures and languages. This mode of relation results from the 'imitation within difference' ('mimicry') that characterizes the colonizer/colonized relationship, and challenges the postulate of a relationship, which would be exclusively constructed on opposition.
  8. In reference to Dipesh Chakravarty (2000)'s seminal essay.
  9. Gayatri Spivak (2009a, 2009b, 2011) and Butler & Spivak (2009).
  10. Ten years after Mamadou Diouf (1999)'s translation.
  11. Translated from Bhasin and Menon (1993).
  12. See Devi (2002).
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